

'Instant History'



THE year 1967 will see spirited new debate on the value of "instant history."

The life and death of John F. Kennedy have, of course, provided the biggest spur in this century to the quick retelling of great events.

In 1965 the Theodore Sorensen and Arthur Schlesinger books on Mr. Kennedy's presidency were laid down as important building blocks in the final edifice which real history — with its necessary long perspective — will erect for him.

So, in a quite different way, will William Manchester's book, "The Death of a President," begin to serve this function.

But no American should forget the highly preliminary nature of these works. They are not history, but merely its materials.

In the case of the Manchester book, interest among influential figures and average citizens is hugely compounded by the fact that it involves the martyred Kennedy, his beautiful wife with her unbounded capacity to gain the attention of millions, an incumbent, President, the cruel drama of an assassination, and the linking of many other persons of prominence to that event.

All of this interest is both legitimate and inevitable. It must be observed, however, that the quite agitated anticipation of Mr. Manchester's work seems to go considerably beyond this.

Highly significant is the fact that a major magazine bought the serial rights to the story for more than six times the price paid to Mr. Sorensen and Mr. Schlesinger for their respected, well-received undertakings.

This huge payment would not have been made for even the most immediate of instant histories, or for simply a thoroly-organized, dramatically written re-recital of the central events surrounding the assassination.

By Bruce Biossat

The magazine rights were bid so high because the bidders deemed the reader market great enough to bear the cost. It was judged, no doubt rightly, that the American people and millions abroad have an insatiable appetite for personal detail, for intrigue, for feuding and other conflict; indeed, for just plain gossip, as it affects the lives of high public figures — and particularly the late John Kennedy, his family, and his successor, Lyndon Johnson.

Perhaps it always has been so. Certainly, in this current instance, there should be no pretense that it is not the case. From the publishers there was too much self-serving nonsense about the "people's right to know," when what was most at issue in the dispute between them and Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy were many of her highly personal revelations and reactions which have little if anything to do with illuminating the assassination story.

That these intimate details will now be bootlegged or otherwise printed by foreign publishers only underscores the point. The market for such details — even when not authentic — is immense. as the so-called "movie fan" magazines discovered long ago in their unending, successful exploitation of popular interest in Mrs. Kennedy.

This aspect of the interest in the Manchester book should not be thrust aside merely because neither the Kennedys nor anyone else involved in the dispute exactly covered themselves with glory as it was acted out. It is clearly a work, which, clandestinely if no other way, will feed racy appetites.

Because instant history captures human recollection while it is fresh, historians believe in it, tho they recognize that its writing can become an element itself in the larger sweep of real history — and sometimes create or perpetuate myths with harmful effect to persons or events.

What the Manchester work may generate is a more thoughtful concern for separating the genuinely useful materials of history from exciting private matters which have only glancing effect upon the course of events.